

From disaster to possibility: advancing alternative tourism futures in Jasper National Park post-wildfire

Brooklyn Rushton, Christopher J. Lemieux, Daniel J. Scott and Mark Groulx

Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how tourism professionals and community representatives envision the future of tourism in Jasper National Park (JNP) after a devastating wildfire in July 2024. It explores how recovery dynamics intersect with structural vulnerabilities and whether disruption can open pathways for transformative change.

Design/methodology/approach – Guided by the Futures Triangle framework (Inayatullah, 2023) and the Pressure and Release model (Wisner et al., 2004), semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 tourism professionals and community representatives in JNP. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify how structural vulnerabilities, recovery dynamics and future visions intersect.

Findings – The results reveal a tension between systemic vulnerabilities and aspirational futures for tourism in JNP post-wildfire. Pre-existing vulnerabilities, including housing insecurity, workforce precarity, governance misalignment, undercapacity, climate risk and economic fragility, left tourism highly susceptible to disturbance and were further exacerbated by the wildfire. Still, interviewees envisioned regenerative, equitable and climate-resilient futures, though these remain constrained by limited capacity, jurisdictional fragmentation, risk aversion and entrenched power dynamics.

Originality/value – This is the first empirical study to apply a futures-thinking framework and a critical disaster lens to a post-wildfire tourism context in a world-renowned protected area destination. It offers a critical perspective on the limits and challenges of resilience discourses in tourism and highlights the importance of effective governance, equity and imagination in advancing tourism transformation amid the polycrisis.

Keywords Transformation, Wildfire, Futures triangle, Tourism resilience, Critical disaster studies, Pressure and release model

Paper type Research article

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1. Introduction

From wildfires and floods to pandemics, war and geopolitical instability, tourism is increasingly shaped by a global polycrisis (Gössling and Scott, 2024), defined as an interconnected web of escalating risks that overlap, cascade and amplify one another (Lawrence et al., 2024). For tourism-dependent communities, converging crises pose existential challenges, compounded by the sector's entanglement with capitalist growth imperatives that reinforce vulnerability (Bianchi and Milano, 2024). This contradiction underscores the need to move beyond incremental adaptation toward transformative approaches (Bellato et al., 2022) that recognize planetary boundaries (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2024; Scheffran, 2025) and limits to tourism growth (Fletcher et al., 2023).

Amid the overlapping challenges of the polycrisis, climate change is one of the most significant threats to tourism systems. The impacts of climate change range from slow-onset changes, such

as glacial retreat, biodiversity loss and seasonal shifts, to acute shocks, such as floods, heatwaves and wildfires (Scott and Gössling, 2022; Hsu and Sharma, 2023; Scott, 2024). Mountain regions, protected areas and gateway communities are particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on nature-based tourism and their exposure to multiple environmental hazards (McDowell et al., 2023; Rushton et al., 2024; Steiger et al., 2022).

Among the various climate risks influencing tourism, wildfires stand out as one of the most urgent and devastating, with recent events in Hawaii, USA, Queensland, Australia and several Mediterranean destinations (Mehta, 2023; Neger et al., 2024; Reiner et al., 2024). Wildfires force mass evacuations, destroy attractions and tourism infrastructure and shut down tourism operations for timeframes that vary widely depending on the scale and severity of the event. These impacts have cascading effects on destination resilience, from visitor perceptions and destination reputation to community wellbeing and ecological recovery (Cartier and Taylor, 2020; Kim and Jakus, 2019; Labhiri et al., 2024; Otrachshenko and Nunes, 2021). The consequences of these effects are often intensified by limited proactive risk reduction efforts by public agencies and broader tourism industry actors (Barr et al., 2024).

Jasper, Alberta, a tourism-based community within Canada's second most visited national park, offers a stark example of how climate change threatens destination resilience. In July 2024, an intense and fast-moving wildfire burned more than 30,000 hectares in Jasper National Park (JNP), destroyed over 300 structures in the town of Jasper and forced the evacuation of over 20,000 residents and visitors at the height of the summer tourism season (Parks Canada, 2025a). Beyond the immediate destruction and displacement, the wildfire resulted in an estimated \$1.3 billion in insured losses, making it the second-costliest wildfire in Canada's history (Insurance Bureau of Canada, 2025a,b).

Jasper's experience, though significant, reflects the broader systemic challenges facing global tourism. For decades, growth-driven narratives have framed destinations as endlessly resilient, assuming they will inevitably rebound after crises (Espinoza-Figueroa et al., 2025; Mullis, 2017). However, successive shocks, from COVID-19 to escalating climate disasters, have disrupted this belief, revealing how dominant recovery framings prioritize business continuity while obscuring structural vulnerabilities (Hall et al., 2024; OECD, 2022). Scholars now highlight the limits of resilience, arguing that destinations cannot absorb continual shocks without structural reform (Davies and Arrieta, 2024). Wildfire recovery exemplifies this paradox: the push to "return to normal" often reinforces underlying vulnerabilities, yet crises can also open entry points for transformative change (Ajulo et al., 2020; Cartier and Taylor, 2020; Hall, 2016; Rachunok and Nateghi, 2021; Spalazzi and Mariotti, 2024), which Charbonneau and Giguère (2025) define as the "uncertainty–possibility space". As the polycrisis deepens, scholars call for forward-looking, systems-based approaches to reimagine tourism futures (Gössling and Scott, 2025; Hall et al., 2024).

Understanding how recovery and transformation unfold through the perspectives of those within the tourism system, including what they believe must be preserved, changed and reimaged, remains critical for navigating the uncertainty–possibility space of the polycrisis (Charbonneau and Giguère, 2025). As such, this study therefore explores how tourism professionals and community representatives in Jasper, Alberta, interpret past vulnerabilities, recovery processes and future possibilities for tourism after the 2024 wildfire. It is guided by the question: *How do different tourism professionals and community representatives in Jasper envision the future of tourism following the 2024 wildfire and what factors shape or constrain the possibilities for transformation?*

By situating Jasper's wildfire recovery within the futures thinking literature, this study makes three key contributions to tourism scholarship. First, it extends resilience and disaster discourse by analyzing how a climate change-induced disaster interacts with longstanding vulnerabilities in a community reliant on nature-based tourism. Second, it demonstrates the value of futures methodologies for surfacing alternative tourism futures in the wake of disaster. Third, it offers one

of the first place-based accounts of wildfire's implications for tourism in a protected area destination globally, with insights relevant to other destinations facing future climate disasters and adaptation challenges.

1.1 Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

1.1.1 Resilience theory. Resilience, originally rooted in ecological theory (Holling, 1973), has evolved into a multidisciplinary framework for understanding how systems respond to shocks and uncertainty (Mayar et al., 2022). It is now recognized as a dynamic capacity shaped by the scale of disturbance and the system's ability to absorb shocks, encompassing four interrelated functions: (1) resisting shocks, (2) absorbing disturbances, (3) adapting incrementally and (4) transforming in response to systemic challenges (Folke et al., 2010; Till et al., 2024). Realizing transformative change, however, depends on enabling conditions such as governance, agency and capacity (Orr and Burch, 2025).

Within tourism research, resilience has become central to examining responses to converging crises (Gössling and Scott, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). Early studies emphasized “bouncing back” to pre-crisis conditions (Arrowsmith and Inbakaran, 2002; Hicks et al., 2009), but recent work reframes destinations as complex adaptive systems where resilience includes the capacities to absorb, adapt and transform (Ketter, 2022; Hartman, 2023). This mirrors broader theoretical shifts towards more nuanced understandings of resilience, where emphasis has moved from stability and recovery to the dynamics of change, thresholds and transformation, while also prompting caution against celebratory framings that assume limitless resilience capacities. Instead, critical perspectives are needed to confront systemic limits and the possibility of increasing tourism disruption amid the polycrisis (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2024; Rastegar et al., 2023a).

1.1.2 Critical disaster studies and progression of vulnerability. Certain scholars within critical disaster studies (CDS) extend resilience theory by emphasizing the political, social and historical dimensions of vulnerability in disaster management (Remes and Horowitz, 2021). Emerging as a critique of technocratic approaches, CDS reframes disasters not as isolated “natural” events, but as socially constructed phenomena shaped by power relations and structural inequities (Cretney, 2017; Tierney, 2014). While resilience discourses often risk obscuring these systemic drivers by focusing on adaptation (Uekusa and Matthewman, 2022), CDS highlights how risks are unevenly produced and disproportionately borne by marginalized groups in communities.

Within the CDS literature, the Pressure and Release (PAR) model (Wisner et al., 2004), rooted in the Progression of Vulnerability theory (Wisner and Alcántara-Ayala, 2023), conceptualizes disasters as the intersection of hazards and socially produced vulnerabilities progressing from root causes through dynamic pressures to unsafe conditions (Kelman, 2018). It was chosen as a conceptual framework for this study due to its diagnostic value in tracing how structural vulnerabilities amplify disaster risk. The model has been applied to climate adaptation (Awal, 2015), flood risk (Rauken and Kelman, 2010) and disaster risk reduction (Ndah and Odihi, 2017), though it has been critiqued for overlooking exposure and environmental vulnerability (Hammer et al., 2019). However, given tourism's dependence on ecological systems, this study addresses these gaps by examining environmental dynamics alongside social, economic and governance vulnerabilities. Both CDS and the PAR model foreground justice and equity in disaster management, yet such perspectives remain rare in tourism research, which often overlook the root causes of disaster (Hall et al., 2018).

1.1.3 Futures thinking. Unlike forecasting, futures thinking emphasizes normative inquiry, asking what futures are desirable, who defines them and how they might be realized (Canina et al., 2022; Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2023). In tourism, futures thinking has been used to challenge growth paradigms (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2024), envision post-disaster futures (Hall et al., 2024)

and support participatory scenario planning (Henriksson and Mantere, 2023). In the context of climate change and disaster recovery, futures thinking methodologies provide critical tools for exploring possible futures and the pathways to realize them (Benedikter, 2025).

Among the many futures thinking methodologies, Inayatullah's (2023) Futures Triangle (Figure 1) provides a useful framework for analyzing complex problems and has been applied across sectors such as education and health (Russo, 2019; Thanh, 2006). It structures inquiry around the *weights of the past* (i.e. structural constraints), *pushes of the present* (i.e. current trends and disruptions) and *pulls of the future* (i.e. aspirational visions and emerging values). The model was selected because it links historical vulnerabilities with prospective transformation pathways, which is an approach well suited to post-disaster contexts where vulnerability and aspirational change intersect. While primarily a heuristic for mapping and reflection (Inayatullah, 2008), it is complemented in this study by the PAR model to enhance analytical depth for pre-wildfire conditions in the tourism system. Despite its potential, the Futures Triangle remains underutilized in tourism research (Abdullah, 2023).

2. Methodology

2.1 Study area

Jasper is a tourism-based community situated in JNP, Alberta – the largest national park in the Canadian Rockies, a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site and Canada's second most visited park (Parks Canada, 2023). The town, home to about 4,780 residents (Government of Alberta, 2025), serves as a regional tourism hub. JNP's montane ecoregion was historically shaped by a mixed-severity fire regime, including Indigenous burning practices (Chavardès and Daniels, 2016; Murphy, 2007; Tande, 1979). However, more than a century of fire suppression since the park's establishment in 1907 (Parks Canada, 2025b) created dense, homogenous forests, enabling a mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) outbreak that impacted up to 90% of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) over the past decade (Tricker et al., 2025) (Figure 2). While the outbreak reintroduced forest heterogeneity,

Figure 1 Conceptual illustration of the Futures Triangle framework (adapted from UNDP, 2022), showing how the weights of the past, pushes of the present and pulls of the future interact

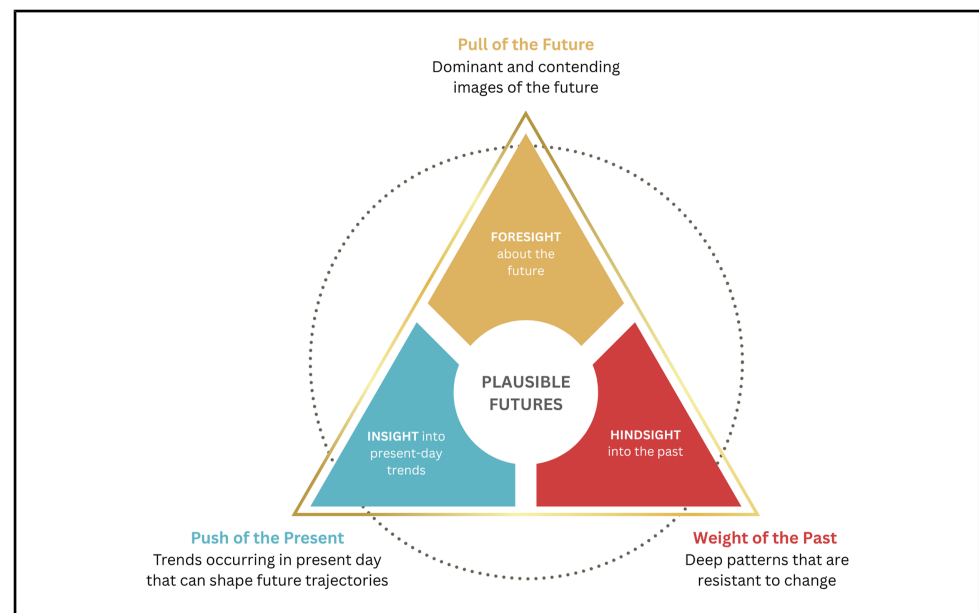
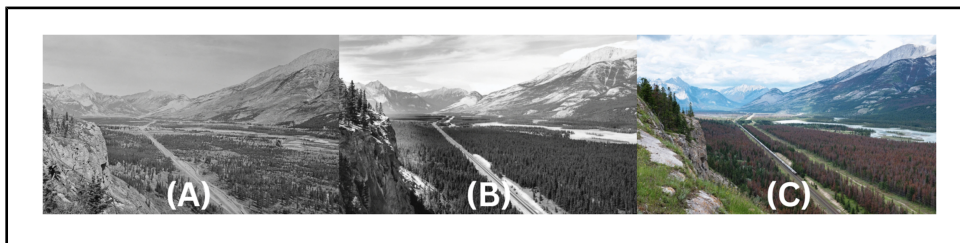


Figure 2 Changes in forest cover in JNP (A: 1915 historical photograph, (b) 1998 repeat photograph, (c) 2019 repeat photograph). Source: [Mountain Legacy Project \(n.d.\)](#)



the accumulation of beetle-killed stands, combined with hotter, drier springs and summers due to climate change has significantly increased wildfire risk ([Seidl *et al.*, 2017](#); [Tricker *et al.*, 2025](#)).

The forest conditions described above set the stage for the summer of 2024, when JNP experienced a devastating wildfire that burned over 30,000 hectares in the Athabasca Valley ([Figure 3](#)). Known as the Jasper Wildfire Complex, this event destroyed 358 structures in the town, damaged 255 Parks Canada infrastructure assets and forced the evacuation of more than 20,000 residents and visitors on July 22, 2024, forcing the closure of the park and townsite for three weeks. Despite strong early-season visitation, 2024 visitation fell 54% compared to 2023 ([Parks Canada, 2025a](#)). In response, the Jasper Recovery Coordination Centre, a joint initiative of the Municipality of Jasper and Parks Canada, was established to coordinate recovery efforts ([Municipality of Jasper, 2025](#)).

While devastating, the 2024 wildfire was not the only disturbance in the past decade. The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 caused Parks Canada to suspend all visitor services for over two months ([Parks Canada, 2020](#)), resulting in a shift of visitation away from the townsite ([Geng *et al.*, 2024](#)). Later in 2022, the Chetamon wildfire severely disrupted the town's power supply during peak tourism season, causing an estimated \$10 million in lost revenue in less than two weeks ([Global News, 2022](#)), leaving the destination increasingly vulnerable to subsequent shocks.

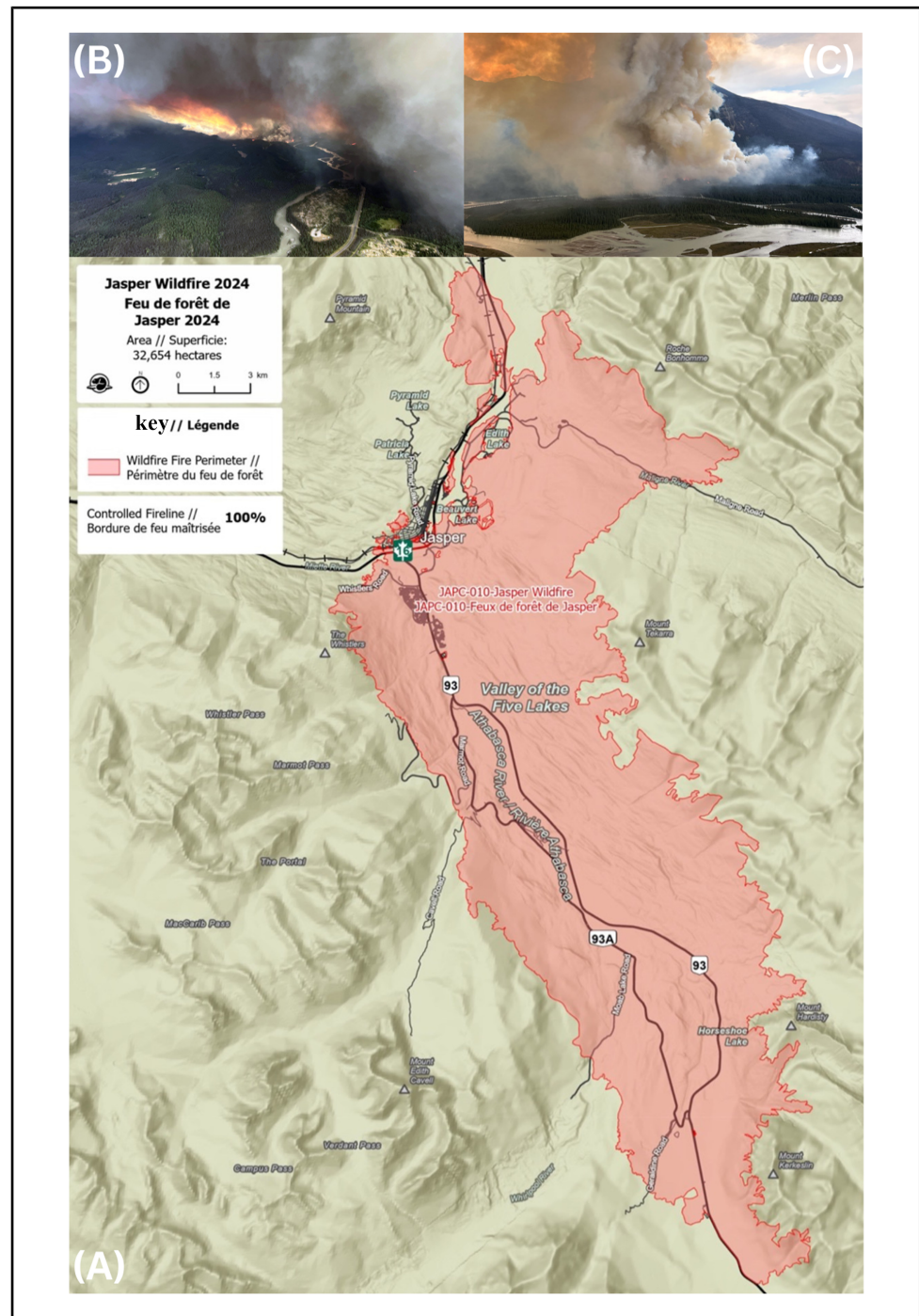
2.2 Data collection

This study used semi-structured interviews ([Faisal, 2024](#); [Kallio *et al.*, 2016](#)) to examine how tourism professionals and community representatives in Jasper reflect on vulnerability and envision tourism futures after the 2024 wildfire. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provided consistency while allowing flexibility to explore contextual factors ([Adams, 2015](#)). The interview protocol ([Appendix A](#)) was informed by [Inayatullah's \(2023\)](#) Futures Triangle framework and [Wisner *et al.*'s \(2004\)](#) PAR model.

Participants were purposively sampled ([Etikan *et al.*, 2015](#)) to ensure representation of the diverse actors in Jasper's tourism system. Eligible participants were over 18 years old, employed in Jasper and directly involved in leadership or decision-making roles related to tourism management and wildfire recovery. Of the 23 individuals invited, 15 responded and participated (65% response rate), which achieved data saturation consistent with methodological guidance emphasizing depth over size ([Ahmed, 2025](#)). To protect anonymity in Jasper's small community, a detailed participant list is not provided; however, the sample included representatives from federal and municipal government, as well as local non-governmental organizations.

Interviews were conducted between May 21 and June 10, 2025, either in person or via Microsoft Teams. Sessions lasted 60–90 min (average 60 min), were audio recorded with consent, transcribed using Riverside Artificial Intelligence, checked for accuracy and de-identified. To preserve anonymity, quotes were referenced by a participant identification number (e.g. P001).

Figure 3 Extent and visual context of the 2024 Jasper Wildfire Complex. (a) Map of the wildfire perimeter in JNP, showing the controlled fireline and transportation corridors; (b) photograph of the south fire; (c) photograph of the northeast fire. Source: [Parks Canada \(2024\)](#)

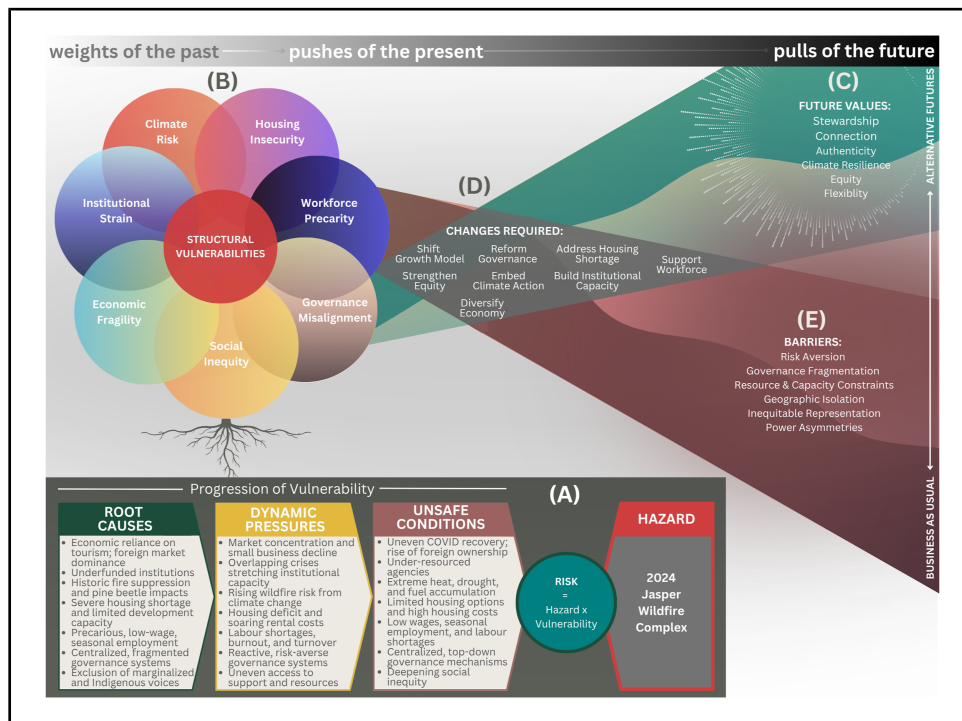


The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University (REB #9209) and conducted under a Parks Canada Research and Collection Permit (#JASNP-2025-46175).

2.3 Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), which positions the researcher's subjectivity as integral to interpretation. As a Jasper resident with tourism expertise and lived experience of the 2024 wildfire, the lead researcher practiced continual reflexivity through journaling and dialogue with co-authors to challenge assumptions (Charmaz, 2014). Analysis began with repeated transcript readings and memoing to identify patterns, followed by inductive coding in NVivo (v15.2.0) and iterative clustering into candidate themes. In later stages, a deductive approach was introduced by organizing candidate themes using Inayatullah's (2023) Futures Triangle framework and Wisner *et al.*'s (2004) PAR model to interpret across the three temporal dimensions (Figure 1) and organize the data to identify factors shaping vulnerability (Figure 4), enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of how structural vulnerabilities interact with recovery dynamics and aspirational futures. This hybrid inductive–deductive approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) balanced sensitivity to participants' perspectives with depth from futures thinking and CDS.

Figure 4 Integrated framework combining the PAR model and the Futures Triangle to illustrate how past vulnerabilities, present recovery dynamics and future aspirations intersect in Jasper's post-wildfire tourism system. (a) Shows the *progression of vulnerability* that amplified disaster risk in the tourism system, which is central to the PAR model. (b) Depicts the *weights of the past* (i.e. structural vulnerabilities that continue to shape present conditions), alongside elements of the *pushes of the present*, where certain current dynamics are intensifying these vulnerabilities. (c) Identifies the *pulls of the future*, representing desired values and aspirations for Jasper's future tourism system. (d) Highlights the changes required to realize these desired futures. (e) Identifies persistent barriers that constrain change and risk keeping the system locked in business-as-usual trajectories



3. Results and discussion

This section integrates results and discussion using the Futures Triangle (Inayatullah, 2023). Section 3.1 combines *weights of the past* and *pushes of the present* to illustrate how longstanding structural vulnerabilities intersected with the dynamics of wildfire recovery. Section 3.2 examines *pulls of the future*, outlining interviewees' aspirations for tourism, changes required and perceived barriers.

3.1 *Weights of the past and pushes of the present*

Crises rarely create new challenges but instead reveal and intensify existing ones (de Ruiter and van Loon, 2022). In Jasper, the 2024 wildfire revealed longstanding structural vulnerabilities in the tourism system, which were magnified and exacerbated by the wildfire. Viewed through Wisner et al.'s (2004) PAR model, interviewee accounts show how accumulated vulnerabilities heightened exposure to the wildfire's impacts and shaped the trajectory of recovery (Figure 4).

3.1.1 Housing insecurity. Housing insecurity has been widely identified as a systemic barrier to resilience in tourism destinations, particularly where land-use restrictions and high demand exacerbate affordability and availability (Mikulić et al., 2021). In Jasper, interviewees described a pre-fire housing deficit of 600 units and a 0% vacancy rate, which the 2024 wildfire worsened by destroying 30% of townscape structures. This fragility rippled through the tourism economy, making it harder to recruit staff and secure stable housing. As one respondent noted, *"housing has always been a challenge . . . The events of 2024 really highlighted how dependent our entire community is on the people who make the tourism industry run"* [P005]. Ultimately, participants emphasized that housing underpins both tourism and recovery: *"It all boils down to housing. Everything does. Without housing, you can't really focus on anything else"* [P014].

3.1.2 Workforce precarity. Even before the wildfire, Jasper's tourism workforce faced entrenched precarity, characterized by low wages, high turnover and seasonal instability, mirroring structural characteristics across the industry (Robinson et al., 2019). Interviewees described reliance on a transient labour force, including temporary foreign workers often tied to employer-provided housing, which deepened vulnerability. Seasonal work was also noted to leave many individuals susceptible to layoffs.

The labour crisis was seen as systemic, as indicated by [P006]: *"the model is built on expendability. When things fall apart, workers are the first to go and the last to be considered"*, which was echoed by [P009]: *"This isn't about the fire. This is about decades of undervaluing the people who make this town run"*. This vulnerability was noted to be deep in the wake of COVID-19 which drove many out of the tourism workforce permanently, as indicated by [P001]: *"it's not just quitting a job, it's resignation from the system"*, highlighting concerns that tourism's repeated exposure to crises may undermine its long-term viability as an attractive industry to work in. Similar dynamics have been observed globally, where tourism's crisis-prone nature contributes to persistent workforce challenges (Baum, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019).

Many also voiced concerns over burnout among frontline staff. *"We're going to face burnout at intervals again and again. People will leave"*, warned one interviewee [P003], while another indicated *"It's only May . . . some staff are already burned out. Soon, they'll be serving visitors who might ask, 'Did you lose your house?'"* [P008]. Such dynamics underscore how frontline tourism workers are particularly vulnerable to burnout, displacement and psychosocial stress, often bearing the invisible weight of recovery beneath the expectation of hospitality (Baum, 2018; Cheer, 2020).

3.1.3 Governance misalignment. Misalignment between the federal, provincial and municipal governments in Jasper was noted as a longstanding structural vulnerability that severely constrained the ability to adapt and often led to diluted accountability, as indicated by [P008]: *"it's*

hard to place responsibility and even harder to hold people accountable". As one interviewee explained, *"With different levels of government operating under unique mandates, alignment is not always easy."* [P015], while another cautioned, *"unless we establish long-term collaborative mechanisms, we're going to be stuck in this cycle"* [P013]. This is a recurring challenge in other tourism-dependent regions, particularly where multiple jurisdictions overlap and community voices have limited authority (Dredge, 2019).

Exacerbated by the wildfire, interviewees described an erosion of local authority, where community members and local leaders were excluded from processes that shaped tourism recovery efforts. *"Decisions are often made in Ottawa and Edmonton, while local voices have limited influence"*, one interviewee remarked [P015]; while another reflected, *"the real decision-makers should be those connected to the community itself"* [P009]. Others discussed the endurance of command-and-control structures established during the emergency response phase: *"the command structure was necessary at first, but it stuck around too long. We were left out of decisions about our own community"* [P001]. This dynamic raises a broader question highlighted in the disaster governance literature: once power is centralized during a crisis, under what conditions is it returned to communities? As Hillhorst et al. (2020) note, disasters often trigger command-and-control responses, but redistribution of authority post-crisis remains contested. Without transition mechanisms, temporary emergency structures risk becoming normalized, constraining local authority (Aldrich, 2019; Tierney, 2014).

Despite intentional efforts, many interviewees described community engagement during recovery as inconsistent or inaccessible. As one noted, *"opportunity and engagement aren't always the same thing"* [P007], underscoring that formal mechanisms often failed to ensure meaningful inclusion, particularly for equity-deserving groups. *"Those who are struggling the most are often the least likely to be heard"*, added another [P008], with concerns raised about the exclusion of frontline workers, newcomers, small business owners and Indigenous peoples. Participants additionally emphasized that engagement requires more than information sharing: *"there's a real difference between informing people and actually listening . . . the second part takes more work, and we're still learning how to do that"* [P012]. These perspectives highlight the importance of community-based tourism approaches post-crisis that prioritize local ownership and decision-making (Prakoso et al., 2020; Lundin and Soulard, 2025).

3.1.4 Social inequity. *"There's just an inherent structural precarity in living in Jasper . . . any external shock only exacerbates that"*, stated [P012]. Interviewees agreed that the wildfire intensified existing social vulnerabilities and exposed new ones. *"A lot of people were already on the edge . . . the fire was the tipping point"*, explained [P002]. They described a visible social divide, where marginalized groups live in precarious conditions and cautioned that collective trauma can obscure these inequities: *"when the entire community becomes the victim of a mass trauma event like this, the needs of the whole community are elevated, and some of those underlying dynamics are less emphasized"* [P012]. As a result, the most vulnerable risk being overlooked in the recovery process, which is a dynamic with direct implications for tourism.

"When we talk about Jasper's tourism recovery, we need to understand that it hinges on the health and wellbeing of the entire community", reflected [P009]. This pattern mirrors findings in critical tourism and disaster studies, which indicate that crises tend to reinforce existing vulnerabilities (Calgaro et al., 2014) and highlights the need to embed equity within recovery frameworks (Fresnoza et al., 2024; Pelling and Garschagen, 2019). For some, this deepening precarity manifested as a broader sense of loss and detachment: *"it's not just quitting a job; it's detachment from place and permanence"* [P001].

3.1.5 Economic fragility. Following the wildfire, pre-existing vulnerabilities in Jasper's tourism economy were significantly amplified. For many small businesses, the wildfire was described as the latest in a series of cumulative crises. *"It's just been one more event in a series of events from the past five years"*, said one interviewee [P011]. Several businesses, particularly small and

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), were noted to have only recently returned to making a profit after COVID-19, only to be pushed back into survival mode by the 2024 wildfire. Recovery was further complicated by a perceived inconsistency in accessing financial support, as businesses with physical infrastructure losses were noted to receive targeted aid, while those that faced operational disruptions due to the resulting downturn in tourism felt overlooked. *“It’s hard to explain that we don’t have enough to support everyone equally”*, noted one interviewee [P008].

Further, interviewees consistently emphasized that Jasper’s dominant reliance on tourism made its local economy uniquely vulnerable to disruption, which is widely recognized in the tourism literature as a structural vulnerability of the sector (Hall *et al.*, 2018; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019). As one interviewee explained:

“Having a community or an economy so dominated by a single sector creates vulnerabilities. If there’s a global pandemic or a wildfire, and tourism takes a downturn, that reverberates throughout the community. There are very few release valves or alternate employment options in different industries” [P012].

Several interviewees additionally expressed frustration with the lack of strategic foresight for economic development in local government agencies. As one stated:

“I believe both the municipal government and Parks Canada missed an opportunity by not having an Economic Development Officer. An Economic Development Officer isn’t just about attracting business or increasing profits. Done right, it’s about curating the type of business you want in your community . . . The prevailing position that tourism is strong, so economic development isn’t needed, and the economy will take care of itself has created conditions where large operators can consolidate and lead to a cookie-cutter offering of shops and services” [P004].

The wildfire was also noted to leave Jasper’s economy vulnerable to consolidation by large actors. More specifically, larger, often international, corporations were described as having greater financial reserves and political influence, enabling them to withstand crises and even strengthen their market position post-wildfire. As one interviewee explained, *“large corporations often emerge from crises stronger, while small and medium-sized businesses struggle”* [P008]. The wildfire was seen to intensify this trend, accelerating industry consolidation. *“We’re vulnerable to predatory acquisition and inevitable consolidation. That will change the character of our community”*, warned one interviewee [P001].

These accounts reflect broader patterns observed in tourism economies, where SMEs are disproportionately vulnerable to crises due to limited financial reserves, reliance on seasonal demand and exposure to external shocks beyond their control (Rastegar *et al.*, 2023b). Inequities in access to recovery funding are also well-documented, with larger operators often better positioned to navigate bureaucratic systems or absorb losses (Wright *et al.*, 2021). Such dynamics align with concerns about disaster capitalism, where crises enable powerful actors to consolidate market share, acquire assets and reshape destinations in ways that privilege external investors over local communities (Tham and Prayag, 2024). Without deliberate governance to protect economic equity, recovery risks favouring large actors and eroding Jasper’s culture, identity and long-term resilience.

3.1.6 Climate risk. The tourism literature increasingly recognizes climate change as both a direct and indirect risk, influencing visitor experiences, straining infrastructure and threatening destination viability (Gössling and Scott, 2025). In Jasper, the combination of a volatile natural environment and a rapidly changing climate was viewed as a foundational vulnerability. As one interviewee explained:

“Climate change is absolutely a threat . . . we’ve seen reduced snowpack in winter . . . wildfire smoke has also been a major issue . . . For visitors who planned their trips years in advance, especially international guests, the impact is huge. If they can’t see anything, their entire perception of the destination suffers, and that word spreads” [P009].

Several interviewees reflected that the wildfire had reframed how climate risks are understood and respected. For example, one interviewee indicated that, *“it’s becoming clear that the environment*

isn't just important for clean air, it's central to the tourism economy" [P008]. Yet others emphasized gaps in awareness, *"visitors don't often think about those hazards when coming to a national park"* [P013], while outdated infrastructure was noted to be ill-suited to modern climate risks. Several participants also pointed to limited recognition of climate risk: *"How many lessons do we need to learn before we admit our community is not resilient or prepared? We're working and living in a climate crisis. It's not 'what if' anymore"* reflected [P011].

These reflections echo wider concerns in the tourism literature that climate change is often perceived as a distant threat until a major hazard event brings its consequences into frontal view (Shakeela *et al.*, 2013). Jasper's experience shows how disasters can catalyze awareness yet also expose persistent gaps in preparedness and adaptive capacity. Ultimately, resilience depends not only on infrastructure but on shifting perceptions, capacity and governance cultures toward collective recognition of, and adaptation to, new climate realities (Dredge, 2019; Singh *et al.*, 2021).

3.1.7 Institutional strain. Institutional undercapacity is a common constraint in tourism regions, particularly where small municipalities or public agencies are tasked with managing competing priorities (Espinero *et al.*, 2017). Even prior to the wildfire, interviewees described chronic undercapacity across local and federal agencies, with limited staff and resources to meet the complex demands of a tourism-based community embedded within a national park. As one interviewee reflected, *"there was already not enough room to manage all the moving pieces"* [P011]. Coordination between organizations was noted to be challenging, while long-term planning was indicated to be often sidelined by immediate operational demands.

The wildfire significantly intensified existing institutional pressures. Interviewees described the overwhelming and often competing demands of recovery, including rebuilding infrastructure, supporting social recovery and resuming tourism, all occurring simultaneously and with reduced staff capacity. As one interviewee put it, *"There are so many things that you don't think of that have to happen all at the same time ... coordinating all that is a major challenge ... You solve one problem, and it creates three more"* [P003]. Similar dynamics are well documented in the disaster recovery literature, where limited resources force agencies to prioritize urgent operational tasks over longer-term strategic planning (Finucane *et al.*, 2020; Olshansky and Chang, 2009). As Aldrich (2012) notes, these pressures often mean that recovery depends as much on social networks and external support as on formal institutional capacity.

3.2 Pulls of the future

As seen in other global tourism crises (Spalazzi and Mariotti, 2024), the 2024 wildfire represented a "transformative juncture" (Hall *et al.*, 2024) – a moment when alternative futures could be actively imagined. In its aftermath, interviewees envisioned a tourism system that moves beyond business as usual to confront longstanding vulnerabilities. As one participant reflected:

"Recovery done right doesn't just put the community back where it was before the disaster ... In theory, five, seven, ten years down the line, the community should be in a stronger position than it would have been if the disaster had never occurred." [P004]

The *pulls of the future* identified by participants centred on stewardship, connection, authenticity, climate resilience, equity and flexibility (Figure 4). These visions align with what resilience scholars describe as the normative dimensions of transformation, where futures are actively imagined (Folke *et al.*, 2016; O'Brien, 2012). The following subsections examine these values, required changes and key barriers.

3.2.1 Values. Interviewees articulated a diverse set of guiding values for Jasper's tourism future that can be broadly characterized as a regenerative, resilient tourism system that honours the land, supports community wellbeing, creates connection and adapts to future challenges with flexibility and imagination.

To begin, participants emphasized that tourism must be grounded in stewardship of the natural environment and community. *“An authentically regenerative system would prioritize social and environmental wellbeing. Economic viability should be the outcome of supporting those two pillars”* stated [P009]. Several also stressed adapting to new climate realities: *“We understand climate change more deeply now. We could be a leader in how we respond, not just rebuild, but reimagine”* reflected [P005].

Additionally, interviewees called for deeper connection between visitors and the destination. Tourism, in their view, should foster relationships between people and nature, hosts and visitors and across cultures. As such, there was a call amongst interviewees for a tourism system that reflects Jasper’s diverse community and JNP’s diverse ecosystems. They cautioned against generic tourism products to preserve authenticity: *“That mindset of simply passing through, stopping at a generic gift shop, picking up a trinket, and moving on, I’d love to see less of that”* stated [P003].

Further, values of equity and social responsibility were central. They envisioned a system that does not cater exclusively to affluent visitors but one that is accessible to diverse travellers. In essence, rather than growing tourism at the expense of community wellbeing, interviewees advocated for a model that distributes the benefits of tourism and fosters shared responsibility. As P005 indicated, *“as we move forward, we need to focus more on distributing the benefits of tourism throughout the community”*.

Finally, flexibility was seen as vital for navigating uncertainty. *“If we say, ‘this is what success looks like in 2050,’ we risk missing what matters along the way”* reflected [P015]. Others echoed the need for adaptive approaches: *“anytime there’s a bottleneck or disruption, there’s a chance to consider what the next phase can look like”* [P001]. As one summarized, *“embracing resiliency, welcoming challenges, staying open-minded, being creative and willing to pivot—that will be essential”* [P010].

The values stated above are mirrored in pre-existing strategies such as the *Jasper Destination Stewardship Plan 2033* (Tourism Jasper, 2023) and the *Jasper National Park Management Plan* (Parks Canada, 2022). Yet the real challenge lies not in articulating what should change, but in building the governance, capacity and social license to enact it (Deubelli and Mechler, 2021; Jørgensen et al., 2024). Without bridging this operationalization gap (Hochrainer-Stigler et al., 2023), even the most well-aligned visions risk reverting to business as usual (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016).

3.2.2 Changes. To achieve the future vision described above, interviewees highlighted several critical shifts. First was moving beyond a volume-driven growth model toward one reflecting Jasper’s ecological and social carrying capacities. *“There’s so much emphasis on tourism growth, but no honest assessment of what our capacity actually is”* stated [P008]. Some participants called for a decoupling of economic vitality from visitor numbers arguing that this could be done by fostering slower, more intentional tourism, year-round visitation, regional partnerships and more meaningful experiences. These perspectives echo broader calls for slow tourism (Klarin et al., 2023) and the recognition that infinite growth is incompatible with planetary limits (Murray et al., 2025).

Governance reform was identified as imperative, given persistent misalignment between municipal, provincial and federal authorities. As one interviewee argued, *“all levels of government and all stakeholders need to come together and commit to a shared vision”* [P013]. Participants called for integrated planning, shared leadership and Indigenous self-determination in decision-making. Effective governance, they argued, requires inclusive, community-based approaches that empower local actors, elevate marginalized voices and ensure that decision-making reflects the long-term wellbeing of the host community, which is also highlighted by Bramwell and Lane (2011).

Housing emerged as another foundational priority with adequate, affordable and diverse options considered as essential for both seasonal workers and long-term residents. As P001 explained, *"we can do much better, and the community will benefit long-term . . . not-for-profit, co-op style housing can work here too"*. This reflects a broader recognition in tourism research that workforce stability and community wellbeing are inextricably linked to housing, and that chronic housing insecurity undermines community wellbeing and long-term destination viability (Mikulić *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, participants underscored the urgency of embedding climate resilience into all aspects of tourism development and management. The 2024 wildfire was described as a pivotal moment that highlighted the need for decarbonization (Gössling *et al.*, 2023), adaptation (Becken *et al.*, 2020) and climate education (Lemieux *et al.*, 2017). *"We're not planning for yesterday's conditions anymore . . . the climate crisis is shaping the present and future of this place"* [P013]. This aligns with wider calls to mainstream climate adaptation into tourism management, where resilience is understood not only as crisis response but as proactive planning (Scott, 2024). Without this shift, participants cautioned that Jasper risks repeating cycles of climate disruption where short-term recovery takes precedence over long-term resilience, fundamentally challenging the limits to resilience (Davies and Arrieta, 2024).

3.2.3 Barriers. Despite values-driven visions for post-wildfire tourism, interviewees identified a range of barriers that constrain change. First, a culture of risk aversion was described as limiting innovation and reinforcing path dependency. As one participant noted, *"it's easier to sell a postcard image than confront reality"* [P006]. Further, a lack of imagination was noted by [P004], stating, *"to reimagine, you need people with imagination"*. Tourism scholars similarly caution that destinations often revert to familiar, marketable narratives of place identity after crises, prioritizing rapid recovery through branding continuity, even when deeper, systemic reform is needed (Skinner, 2021). This risks what Holling (1973) describes as "rigidity traps", where systems resist innovation despite escalating pressures.

Governance dynamics and fragmentation between the three levels of government were also framed as a central impediment. *"We're always navigating this maze, trying to move ideas through so many layers of red tape"* stated [P004]. Participants also highlighted how the predominance of federal authority can privilege corporate or national economic interests over local needs, with one remarking that *"institutions and politicians are responding out of a desire to preserve economic revenue, often for large corporations"* [P009]. These dynamics echo broader critiques of tourism governance, where multi-jurisdictional structures often privilege growth-oriented agendas over local priorities (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Dredge and Jamal, 2015).

In addition, resource and capacity constraints were perceived to compound these institutional challenges. Interviewees emphasized that future visions for tourism often far exceed available funding and institutional capacity, with one explaining that *"without consistent funding, innovation and long-term planning are the first things to suffer"* [P003]. This reflects a widely observed challenge in disaster recovery contexts, where undercapacity limits innovation and strategic foresight, leaving institutions focused on immediate operational demands instead of needed systemic change (Aldrich, 2012; Olshansky and Chang, 2009), ultimately undermining long-term resilience (Orchiston, 2013).

Further, Jasper's geographic and institutional context was viewed as simultaneously protective and restrictive. The national park designation with fixed townsite boundaries were recognized as preserving ecological integrity yet also limiting flexibility for adaptation and future development. Geographic isolation was noted to further constrain local capacity to pursue alternative trajectories: *"maybe our isolation protects us, but it also makes it harder to do things differently"* [P003]. These tensions mirror findings in protected area tourism literature, where destinations are often caught between conservation imperatives and the need for socio-economic development (Hall and Boyd, 2005; Saarinen, 2014).

Finally, interviewees emphasized that transformative change would remain elusive without equitable governance. As one interviewee concluded, “*we say we want to reimagine the future, but we don’t always listen to the people who’ve lived its failures*” [P012]. Broader critiques of public participation in tourism governance similarly note that consultation is frequently symbolic rather than substantive, excluding marginalized groups from shaping outcomes (Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018).

These findings echo broader critiques of resilience discourse. As Olsson *et al.* (2014) and Pelling and Dill (2010) note, resilience aspirations often stall when constrained by entrenched norms and power asymmetries. Without addressing these fractures, destinations risk entering a “resilience-as-containment” mode rather than transformative adaptation (Gibson *et al.*, 2016). Deliberate efforts to cultivate collaborative, adaptive and equity-oriented tourism governance and management (Gilpin-Jackson, 2025; Klein *et al.*, 2023) will be critical if Jasper is to move towards the future outlined in Section 3.2.1.

Viewed through the Futures Triangle framework (Inayatullah, 2023) and PAR model (Wisner *et al.*, 2004), Jasper’s path forward involves addressing the *weights of the past* and *pushes of the present* that perpetuate vulnerability, while advancing concrete actions toward the *pulls of the future*. Resilience will depend not on restoring the pre-disaster status quo but on the community’s ability to adapt, learn and reorganize equitably amid uncertainty. Continued investment in local capacity, participatory governance, social equity and future-ready decision-making will be vital to turn emerging resilience into lasting transformation.

4. Study limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into tourism recovery and resilience in Jasper, several limitations must be noted. First, the sample was primarily composed of individuals in leadership and management roles, which may underrepresent frontline workers, Indigenous communities, small business owners and newcomers. Although participants with social service experience were included to reflect the perspectives of vulnerable and marginalized groups, future research should engage these groups directly to deepen understanding of their perspectives on structural vulnerabilities, recovery dynamics and alternative futures. Additionally, interviews were collected during an active recovery phase, which may have shaped participants’ reflections. Further, purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias and limited generalizability (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). However, this limitation was mitigated by intentionally selecting participants from each organization that plays a significant decision-making role in Jasper’s tourism system. Lastly, the lead researcher’s personal connection to the wildfire and tourism context may have introduced interpretive bias; however, reflexive thematic analysis, supported by journaling, co-author dialogue and quote vetting by participants, was used to mitigate this bias.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed how the 2024 Jasper wildfire exposed deep-seated vulnerabilities in a tourism-dependent community, reaffirming that crises rarely create new problems but amplify existing ones. Interviews with 15 tourism professionals and community representatives showed that genuine destination resilience requires structural reform, as recovery without transformative change often reproduces pre-existing vulnerabilities. Post-wildfire, participants envisioned a regenerative, climate-resilient tourism system grounded in stewardship, equity and community wellbeing, yet progress remains constrained by risk aversion, governance misalignment and entrenched power dynamics.

Beyond Jasper, the conceptual model developed here (Figure 4) offers a transferable framework for examining resilience and transformation in other tourism-dependent or hazard-prone regions. By integrating the Futures Triangle framework (Inayatullah, 2023) and the PAR model (Wisner *et al.*, 2004), this study provides a structured lens to trace vulnerabilities, chart pathways for

transformation and link these to future-oriented visions. For scholarship, this study bridges critical disaster and resilience theory to reveal how crises expose inequities while opening transformative possibilities. For practitioners, it underscores that resilience demands systemic change, not incremental fixes. Future research should investigate how transformative change can be realized in tourism systems, including through governance mechanisms, participatory processes, collective agency and policy innovation.

Ethics approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB #9209) and was conducted under Parks Canada Research and Collection Permit (#JASNP-2025-46175).

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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